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ABSTRACT

A national study was conducted to determine the means by which school districts choose principals. The main goals of the study were to describe and characterize both common practices in principal selection and promising alternatives for improvement of common practice. Accordingly, the study was designed in two phases. In phase 1, field research teams closely investigated selection practices in 10 randomly sampled, geographically dispersed school districts with enrollments of 10,000 or more students. In phase 2, three alternative selection models (based on the needs revealed in phase 1) were chosen for study: (1) assessment centers, (2) district-operated internships, and (3) "exemplary" conventional practices. Five school districts were selected to represent these alternatives. In addition to the research report, the study produced a practical manual or sourcebook for use by school boards and administrators to improve methods of selection. Major research findings are described, followed by descriptions of each alternative model, in this executive summary of the project. (TE)

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SELECTING AMERICAN SCHOOL PRINCIPALS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Selecting American School Principals: Research Findings and a Sourcebook for Change

by

D. Catherine Baltzell and Robert A. Dentler

Purposes of the Project

The identification, selection, placement, and role performance of school principals has always been a matter of deep concern and interest to educators. In recent years, concern has intensified as the social and economic pressures on public education have expanded. The role of the principal has come to be seen as perhaps the most complex balancing act in public education. At the same time, it has also come to be seen as the pivotal position for effective educational leadership and renewal of public confidence.

In response to these concerns, the National Institute of Education (NIE) initiated this first national study of the means by which school districts actually choose principals. Although there is widespread agreement on the importance of the principal's role, prior to this study there has been little information available on how they are selected or how they might best be selected.

Recognizing that better understanding of principal selection is becoming increasingly important as the pressures on public education continue to mount and as a large portion of the current cadre of principals retires and requires replacement, NIE specified three main goals for this study: (1) describe and characterize common practices in principal selection; (2) describe and characterize promising alternatives for the improvement of common practice; and (3) produce, in addition to a research report, both a practical manual or sourcebook for use by school boards and school administrators who wish to explore ways to improve their methods of selecting principals, and information or briefing materials to acquaint practitioners with the study.

Design and Execution

This study has been designed and executed in two phases. Phase 1 focused on describing and characterizing common practices in principal selection. Using a quasi-ethnographic method of inquiry, field research teams closely investigated selection practices in ten randomly sampled, geographically dispersed school districts with enrollments of 10,000 or more students. Following the field work, cross-case analyses of the ten districts were conducted to reveal both variations and commonalities in selection practices.

Phase 2 led directly from the findings of Phase 1, and focused on describing and characterizing alternatives to common practice. Based on the widespread needs revealed by Phase 1 for more information on ways of upgrading selection criteria, conducting behavioral performance assessments of candidates, and developing approaches to selection that are compatible with local customs, three types of alternatives were selected for study: (1) assessment centers; (2) district-operated internships; and (3) "exemplary" or especially successful conventional practices. The latter type of alternative was chosen to provide useful models for educators who do not wish to invest in assessment centers or internships, both of which can be costly, and to illustrate immediate changes that could be made should a district desire to change. Through a nomination process, five districts were selected to represent the three types of alternatives. Fieldwork and cross-case analyses for Phase 2 were very similar, albeit not identical, to the methodologies used in Phase 1.

Major Research Findings

Analysis of the Phase 1 data revealed that, while the technical variations in approaches to principal selection are substantial, there are striking commonalities across districts.

First, the top leadership--that is, the superintendent and his key deputies--firmly controls the process. However, the degree of control that these leaders are able to exercise is constrained by local norms, customs,

notions of what a principal is "supposed to be," and traditions of "how we select principals here."

Second, the top leadership's drive for control results from their need and responsibility to reconcile many competing goals and exigencies as they make each appointment decision. These issues include (in addition to the need to appoint adequately capable individuals): promoting staff, preserving seniority, protecting staff in anticipation of layoffs, transfering principals who are having trouble, satisfying parent communities and faculties, meeting equity requirements, and responding to local political conditions. Among these many concerns, educational leadership merits become only one--and quite often not the most important--consideration.

Third, given the many competing aims involved in any appointment decision and the fact that "educational leadership" is difficult to define and measure, "fit" or "image" often come to dominate the selection criteria. While sincere rhetoric about the "importance of selecting the best educational leader" abounds, it seldom translates into specific experience or training requirements for candidates. Rather, once candidates meet the criteria of state certification and a few years teaching/administrative experience, they generally compete on the basis of their "fit" to pervasive local values and customary ways of behaving. And, "fit" often seems to be expressed through physical presence and social manner.

Fourth, women and minorities are increasing their memberships in candidate pools and among the ranks of principals. While the power of the "fit" criteria works against them, the pressure for affirmative action during the past decade has had notable results.

Fifth, the specific, comparative consequences of various selection procedures--particularly the various technical features--are cloudy. Certainly both effective and ineffective principals are selected regardless of the overall process and regardless of particular technical components. And clearly, there is substantial local variation in just what outcomes a "good" or "effective" education is expected to produce.

Nevertheless, two important consequences are clear. Principals themselves often do not know exactly why they have been selected or what their specific mission at their school is to be. Without clearly articulated criteria and reasons for the final employment decision, principals can be undercut in their leadership roles, especially in the first year or two at the school.

In addition, the principal selection process has immense symbolic value. A principal appointment is perhaps the most visible action a superintendent and central administration take. The way it is approached and carried out communicates the values and operational style of the people in charge, as well as their goals for the district. Hence, it affects the morale of teachers, principals, and lower level administrators.

Sixth, although able principals were observed and interviewed everywhere in Phase 1, the processes that led to their selection could not be characterized as merit-based and equity-centered. Merit and equity standards were sometimes achieved, but special local goals, aims, and conditions very frequently determined the selection. In short, the general conventions shaping principal selection seem to be overdetermined by local system management decision constraints and by local customs, and only minimally conditioned by rhetoric about educational leadership and equity.

By the time Phase 1 was completed, we were convinced from the evidence that technical changes in practices could not possibly modify these overall patterns. In fact, we were tempted to try to reconceptualize the functions of the principalship and to propose that structural changes in the delivery of educational services could not be expected to result from changes in the techniques of selecting principals.

Findings from the five Phase 2 systems both confirmed and <u>transformed</u> these Phase 1 findings. The five Phase 2 districts showed that, under some conditions at least, districts can organize their aims, goals, and processes and deeply commit to merit and equity. While there are indeed many cross-pressures working against this, the pressures are surmountable.

The specific technical process features of such efforts are not as important as the basic commitment to the aim itself, which must be widely shared and doggedly pursued if success is to be achieved. Districts that have made this sort of commitment--which can be costly, for it will reverberate throughout the system--are capable of devising techniques most appropriate for their local settings. Districts that have made this commitment also understand that the techniques alone will not do the job. If techniques are implemented without having been deeply connected to deeper aims and goals of merit and equity, they will ring hollow and will soon be subverted to the true aims the district is pursuing.

This is not to say that techniques are unimportant, however. While our findings mitigate against prescribing any one technique of principal selection as the ideal, it is evident that a clear and widely publicized shift towards more merit- and equity-based approaches can be used to signal a corresponding shift in district aims. Further, as the Phase 2 districts showed, certain technical approaches can enhance a district's ability to prepare and assess candidates, as well as solve other selection problems.

Descriptions of Alternatives

The Phase 2 districts differ from those in Phase 1 in degree, not in kind. Some of the technical improvements in principal selection found in Phase 2 were present in part in some Phase 1 districts. The main differences between the two sets seem to boil down to a matter of scope and intensity of policy commitment to school leadership transformation, with Phase 1 districts making some incremental moves in that direction and with Phase 2 districts making relatively deep and sustained changes. These often came after the districts arrived at some systemwide organizational juncture where boards and superintendents alike made a collective and conscious decision to change in some deeply pervasive way.

Our study does not make a conclusive case for principal selection innovations as educationally strategic in effect. Those we interviewed in Phase 2 have reached this conclusion and are emphatic in their testimony.

Many of those we interviewed in Phase 1 are moving towards this conclusion. However, our applied research aim was more modest: to discover and report out the state of practice and, along the way, identify some exemplary developments.

With these points in mind, we now summarize very briefly how some local districts have taken steps to change their leadership selection operations in ways that appear to them and to us to result in the appointment of very competent educators capable of leading across a wide range of duties, and in greater responsiveness to the imperative of increased equity for women and minorities.

Improved Practices in Broward County, Florida and Hillsborough County, Florida

Broward County's principal selection process has grown out of six years of struggle to "find a better way." Our informants characterized former principal selection in Broward as traditionally a highly political, "good old boy" appointment system and more recently, as highly conflicted as various constituencies (e.g., women, minorities, white males) repeatedly challenged the equity and merit of appointments. The selection process that changed this tradition and resolved these conflicts is complex, for it is characterized by various checks and balances to help ensure standards of fairness and professionalism as well as the confidence of various interest groups, and it is closely tied to the district's affirmative action plan.

The process has three main elements: (1) the eligibility list, which essentially sets forth basic selection criteria and career ladders; (2) the vacancy screening, which uses a very lengthy and detailed candidate application form as the basis for blind, multiple ratings of eligible candidates against the specific requirements of each vacancy; and (3) the vacancy interview, which relies upon a broadly composed interview team to select finalists from among the most highly rated eligible candidates. The process is characterized by decentralization of appointment authority, extensive internal and external monitoring for compliance with affirmative action goals,

intense competition among candidates, and the superintendent's deep commitment to maintaining integrity and credibility of implementation.

Hillsborough County's principal selection process has emerged from the disintegration, turmoil and scandal that characterized the district in the 1960s, when political patronage was the central feature of appointments. It has three main elements: (1) well defined, well known career ladders to the principalship, each of which includes universally available development opportunities and scrutiny of candidates by top district administrators; (2) rigorous screening at entry-level ladder positions, conducted by a diversified team composed mainly of school-level staff; and (3) team interviewing of screened and approved applicants for specific vacancies by the top leadership of the district. The process is characterized by broad-based participation of teachers, principals, and assistant principals, who essentially control the entry gates, and the intimate and pervasive involvement of the top district leaders, who control the final appointment decisions. It is also characterized by stability and trust among its participants, built up in part by the consistency and fairness with which it has operated for ten years and in part by the high esteem and respect its top leaders have earned for their integrity and professionalism.

Use of the Internship in Hayward Unified School District, California and Montgomery County Public School System, Maryland

Hayward, a large suburb adjacent to Oakland in the San Francisco Bay Area, began a deep reform of its leadership selection activities late in the 1970s, when the Board hired Dr. Allan Bushnell as Superintendent and gave him exceptionally broad authority to manage the district financially, administratively, and academically. Hayward's public schools were at a crossroad in 1976. In Bushnell's words, they "were belly-up financially" and were facing declining public support.

Bushnell, a seasoned journeyman trouble-shooter, used his mandate to both retrench and upgrade the system. One of his tools was an Administrative Intern Program (AIP). Teachers who meet certain stringent eligibility

criteria apply to enter AIP. Applicants then complete a simulated problem exercise, are screened and rated by a senior administrative team, and those selected begin a three year period of formal training and on-the-job internship. Less than half who apply are eligible to become interns. Among those who stay the course and become Intern Principals, mentoring and inservice training continues through the first year or two on the job.

Teachers have been attracted into Hayward because AIP has established a strong reputation for being merit-based. Women and minority interns have not only expanded in numbers but are being appointed as principals in significant proportions in a system that was managed by anglo men before 1978. The AIP content is strongly oriented toward administrative leadership development, but those selected for internships are already established masters of curriculum and instructional design work. As a result of fair, vigorous sponsorship of AIP, principals appointed between 1955 and 1965 are being replaced very rapidly with a new cadre of exceptionally well qualified, trained, and selected newcomers. There are flaws in the new PSP in Hayward, but even the flaws look like gains when compared with pre-1977 practices. The major achievement of AIP has been to generate a large pool of well trained educational leaders who, in close association with Bushnell's senior management team, have the trust and the skills needed to upgrade the system.

The Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS) in Maryland began its leadership transformation efforts twenty years ago. Its Administrative Training Program (ATP) is but one part of a comprehensive inservice education operation which extends to all staff at all levels. Staff development opportunities are provided as an explicit fringe benefit.

Within ATP, potential principals apply for and take a ten-week, after-work course on leadership. Graduates may then opt for a second 18-week, three-credit course in administrative leadership, which includes skill development. Applicants for internships as assistant principals do not have to take these courses, but nearly all do.

Senior administrators review all performance and related educational records of applicants and rank them from one to four. Highest scoring

candidates are then invited to "Administrative Competence Seminars," where their leadership abilities are formally assessed by a panel of senior administrators.

Names of the best performing candidates are then put on the intern list, and after a waiting period are assigned to a particular school (following panel interviews about that opening) for one year as intern assistant principals. During that year, the intern is rotated on tasks, mentored by the regular principal, and guided as well as appraised by a four-person supervisory team. The intern is paid a regular teacher's salary; the difference between this and an assistant principal's pay becomes a resource kitty for training. Retreats and evaluative activities are included.

Before an intern can be selected as a principal, she undergoes an intensive, two-day assessment which is conducted much like those used in NASSP Assessment Centers. Some 200 competencies are rated. Only the ablest candidates become regular principals upon the decision of the superintendent. Nothing is more central to leadership development in MCPS than the internship experience itself, however.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) Assessment Center in Howard County, Maryland

During the 1970s, the assessment center approach to personnel identification and selection began moving from business and industry into education. The chief effort in this movement has been that of NASSP, which has been engaged since 1975 in developing and pilot testing an assessment center model for use by school districts.

The NASSP Assessment Center uses 12 assessors to systematically evaluate the behavior of six candidates as they participate in simulation exercises designed to measure specific skills dimensions, which include: problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance, oral communication, written communication, range of interests, personal motivation, and educational values. Simulations

and exercises include leaderless group exercises, in-basket exercises, fact-finding stress tests, and personal interviews. Training of assessors is critical. The model is characterized by standardization of its key implementation requirements as well as its basic technical operation. Adopting districts are required to enter contractual agreement to implement and maintain the Center properly. The NASSP model also includes training packages geared to the skills dimensions for use in staff development should adopting agencies desire.

Howard County, which contains both a traditional, rural community and a progressive, affluent suburb, adopted the NASSP Assessment Center in 1980 in order to provide a method for more rigorously and finely discriminating among candidates. The Center takes its place in an already high quality, highly professionalized selection process, and it is viewed by the district as one more step in the evolutionary reform of a traditionally political appointment system. While highly pleased with its Center, Howard County has encountered three important policy issues during its implementation experience that should be considered at the outset by implementing districts: (1) should assessment be required of all candidates? (2) How should outside candidates be handled? (3) What weight is to be given to Center results in comparison with other information?

Clues for Developing a Principal Selection Process

Our research shows that local school districts are much too diverse in goals and practices to benefit from a general prescription of how to go about selecting principals; that there are many ways of designing technical procedures which are equally effective in securing local objectives; and that it is the aims embodied in local history and culture which dictate and shape the real outcomes of principal selection--not techniques. Nonetheless, there are certain general clues for developing improved principal selection practices that emerge from our research.

First, districts that desire to renew and/or reform their principal selection process (PSP) need to undertake self-study and policy appraisal

of the status quo to discover exactly what their aims are and how they are reflected in their current procedures. Further, boards and superintendents should assign weights to what is most and least important to the larger aims of their districts, for only a few issues (e.g., improving school operations, curriculum redesign, principal selection) can be given high priority across any two to three year period.

Second, a school district whose board members and administration decide to embark on PSP changes will need to place great importance on the effort, including the provision of money as well as authority, if the changes are expected to be real in their consequences. Further, the PSP changes need to be harnessed tangibly to the larger aims and outcomes, and the new PSP's objectives explicated in full.

Third, the technical features of the new PSP need to be linked clearly to the larger aims that it is intended to accomplish. In other words, the new PSP should be designed to fit the locale and its policy priorities from the outset.

Fourth, while an improved PSP must be taken seriously by the board and superintendent, and it must be implemented in a fair manner to be consequential, it need not be comprehensive or elaborate in the range of its operating features in order to be highly consequential. If administrators, teachers, and parents conclude from its introduction and from the appointment of the first new principals that a serious and positive change from past procedures is evident, many related changes begin to occur.

Among the procedural elements themselves, several stand out as somewhat regularly central to a new efficacy. One of these is the openness of the intake process. Where people believe that anyone who meets the widely announced eligibility criteria is really welcome to apply, a first condition of efficacy has been met. Another is that of preparation. If eligibility itself or competitive standing as an applicant requires a number of specific experiences and competencies, the PSP becomes respected to the extent that it provides wide access to explicit means for voluntary preparation through

counseling, training or advanced graduate study, service work, or informal apprenticeships.

Another common feature is the importance ascribed to appointment outcomes. Do people who are eligible and who compete effectively actually get principalships? Are some of them perceptibly different from those who used to get appointed?

Another general theme is that a PSP which comes to be highly valued is one that builds a strong network of interdependence among central office and building administrators. This network characteristic can be induced in a variety of ways, but its positive significance for the district comes from the changes in expressiveness, trust, candor, and pace of interlevel communication that result.

Finally, our research leads to some technical elements that appear to be essential to effective implementation even if their forms vary. Several appear to be of special importance. First, it is not only essential to develop and disseminate criterial standards which encompass all of the duties and skills required; it is even more essential to decide in advance what kinds of evidence will be gathered to use in appraising candidates on the basis of the stated criteria. Second, a good PSP is one where generating an adequate pool of candidates is part of the regular business of administering the system locally. Our Phase 2 districts, for example, have in common a strong preoccupation with generating, training, sifting, and conserving a large pool of applicants and future candidates, leaving no aspect of this effort to chance.

Third, it is essential to think through, long in advance of any one search for a principal, the answers to the question: Who will collect and appraise what evidence about candidates? Further, it is essential for a good PSP to balance multiple sources of evidence with multiple sources of assessment. In other words, those who do the screening should comprise more than a cohesive team of senior administrators, for such a closely knit group will likely lose the ability, over time, to correct one another's errors of

judgment and tend to strain toward uniformity. In addition, without some other participation, screening loses its external legitimacy. It appears to take place in a way no one can attest to as trustworthy or well executed, except the same team members. And, the results of the screening should never rest entirely upon the rating screening committee members make based on brief interviews. Rather, additional data should be taken into account.

Future Questions

Positive strides are being made by educational researchers to refine and build a knowledge base pertinent to the preparation, selection, and improved use of the talents of school principals. Local systems where PSP changes have been or are being introduced could enhance knowledge tremendously by conducting objective, research-based evaluations of school and student effects associated with changes in administrative leadership. We recognize that those systems are low on research resources, but better collaboration between personnel, staff development, and research professionals already gathering pertinent data in the course of performing other duties is a feasible means of stretching the research dollars. Superintendents and other district officers who each expend hundreds of hours a year in selecting principals need to learn just what difference their efforts make educationally.

In addition, our research has disclosed the extent to which PSP innovation is but a part of local school system improvements and renewals undertaken jointly between boards and staffs and with strong support from parent leaders. Local systems are capable of profound and continuous self-renewal, and their capacity to achieve it merits serious, long term inquiry. Many of those we interviewed--superintendents, principals, teachers, board members--are working hard on district renewal. They want better answers to the question of what makes a public school <u>system</u> work well, and more research about the treatable conditions which lead to local system development.